

WorkSpace

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E'wao Kagoshima

The New Museum
of Contemporary Art





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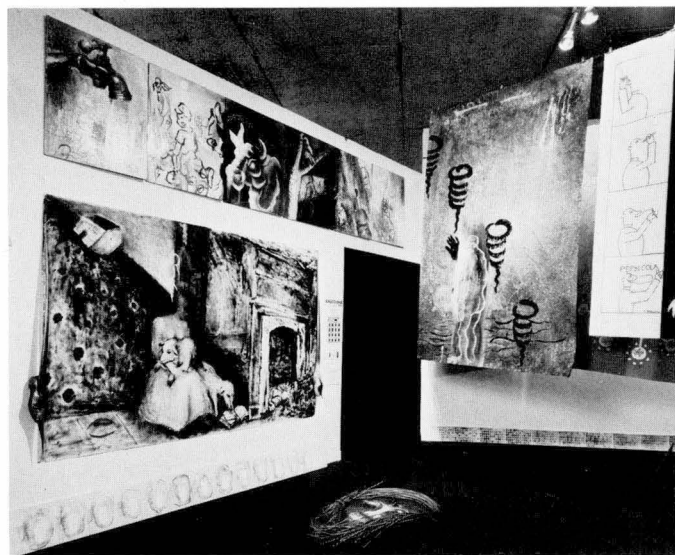
In a symbolic self-portrait positioned prominently at the outset of his "WorkSpace" installation, E'wao Kagoshima offered the viewer a synopsis of the evolution of meaning in his art and of his role as an artist. In this autobiographical work, entitled *1945–1982* (fig. 2, center), a mushroom cloud signifies both creation, the artist's birth in 1945,¹ and destruction, the atomic devastation of two Japanese cities in that year. As a consequence of the Holocausts of World War II, both nuclear and genocidal in Japan and Europe, respectively, humanity witnessed a destruction of certainty—a collapse of faith in any reason, human or divine, resulting in a state of insecurity in the face of suicidal extinction. This state of uncertainty—an inability to know or believe—undermines the basis and purpose of the arts for, Kagoshima asserts, "to create is to be certain."²

Thus, as a synopsis, *1945–1982* sets forth this destruction as a point of departure from which the artist has arrived at conclusions concerning the need to establish meaning anew in order to make art. Yet, this work embraces a circular meaning and method of investigation: creation itself is also a starting point, a means to perceive the nature of reality. As a vehicle to search for possibilities for the future, Kagoshima utilizes his art to conduct a sweeping investigation of history, examining relations of the individual to nature and to culture in order to distill the fundamental means of our existence.

For Kagoshima, the atomic age has eclipsed a vision of the future, rendering the present a meaningless impasse. Contemporary "culture is useless," he contends, as a tool of understanding this new environment; our society is a maze, and its culture a deception. Rather the artist turns to other states of human social development, focusing with an anthropological concern on early modes of existence—hunting and farming, for instance—in order to deduce certain overriding necessities of life.

In *1945–1982*, Kagoshima points to the ceaseless struggle to survive which governs life. An opposition and amalgam of various Eastern and Western aesthetics and philosophies, the elements in this work have divalent sources and multiple meanings, all subsumed in the artist's larger personal statement. The work conveys his conception of reality by means of a Japanese aesthetic in which images are drawn from an inner impression rather than a visual perception and relative scale and disposition connote significance. The towering explosion, signifying a Western attitude of cultural conquest and harnessing of nature, is juxtaposed with a leopard skin below, representing evolutionary history and the natural order of all life. The skin, a found object collaged in Western fashion, dominates the artist's head painted below it, suggesting in this relation the dependent and subordinate role of the human species in a larger web of life. The atmospheric brushwork, deriving from a Japanese tradition, evokes rather than describes the blast and contrasts, thereby, with the scientific specimen below.

Kagoshima's art is a personalized exposition of the dialectic of opposites—destruction and creation, nature and culture, East and West—and is an effort to recognize and ultimately reconcile or transcend these opposing forces and the tensions they generate. Thus, in *1945–*



1982, the actual horror of the cloud of radioactive gases is paradoxically diminished by its tumultuous beauty. Instead, the leopard skin conveys a sense of fear, morbidity, extinction.

The artist creates a similar contradiction in *Platonic Love*, 1982 (cover and fig. 1) in which he depicts a dreamlike situation which he describes as "peaceful but dangerous." A woman with Oriental features in Western, period dress sits calmly, reading a book; two sheep, signs of "wisdom" for Kagoshima, lie docilely in her lap and at her feet. Her expression of tranquility contrasts with the surrounding scenario of destruction. Behind her a numbered house slides menacingly down a steep, rocky slope towards her. Its diagonal path connotes the dichotomy between her inner state of calm absorption and an outer reality of uncontrolled danger and impending ruin. In another work, *One Admission Free*, 1982 (fig. 3, center) a similar state of mind—the archer's serene concentration—is symbolized at left by the sign of the Shinto religion. Depicted as seemingly carved in stone at left, its component parts are disintegrating, like the landscape surrounding the woman in *Platonic Love*, at right.

Geometric forms such as those incorporated in the Shinto sign symbolize the artist's ideas and abstracted ideals. Thus, in *Missing Hand*, 1982 (fig. 1, right), rising spirals denote a "point of view which keeps changing," Kagoshima's intuitive perception of the "spiral of history." The spirals, however, almost form circular closures at top. The circle and sphere traditionally symbolize perfection and unity; for Kagoshima they connote harmony. For the primitive man pictured in this work, peace was achieved when there was "no enemy... no harm... harmony." Like primitives, as well as children (who are primitives of a sort in terms of socialization), contemporary society is perceived by Kagoshima as existing in a state of "ignorance and fear," at the mercy of apparently uncontrollable forces of our collective human nature. Drawing on primitive means of mediating the inexplicable, Kagoshima creates an art filled with myth, magic, and a sense of mystery. He approaches its creation as a child in a



strange new world—with a sense of play, an unfettered imagination, and a questioning innocence. The artist's use of these ingenuous modes of being is, however, predicated on an aesthetic theory, the impetus of which initiated his historical survey. Thus, in this review of past social structures, the relations of the individual to culture and nature are perceived by Kagoshima in terms of the artist as this individual. Consequently the reality and issues of art mirror those of existence in general.

The identity and role of an artist are determined by his/her historical situation and are reflected in the options of accepted style(s) and content. Kagoshima notes that the common role of artists throughout history to visualize a divine order of inspiration thus conditioned the conception of the artist as one who aspired to experience as well as to identify with the Sublime, with God, with an ultimate Master. However, such conceptions, and the value system on which they were based, produced sterile and untenable conclusions for artists. Kagoshima points to the development of the Mannerist period in which he feels artists despaired of trying to surpass or improve upon the achievements of the Renaissance "masters" and turned to a more self-determined form of expression. Kagoshima believes the Mannerist period has parallels with our own, for the inability of contemporary society to provide a credible system of cultural meaning has produced a similar devolution of artistic mastery, resulting in a state of pluralism in the arts. In the absence of a valid, viable social ideology and structure, a market economy—wherein art is produced, promoted, and consumed—operates in the vacuum. Kagoshima acknowledges this new system, suggesting its impoverishment as a context for art, by nominally assigning a ridiculous monetary value to his work as in *Show*

Window I, 1982, where the work incorporates a "\$1.00" price tag (fig. 1, right). Assuming the accompanying role of the artist as merchant, Kagoshima set up shop in his "WorkSpace" installation, aggressively placing "For Sale" signs on the work.

Noting the Latin root of "Mannerist"—*manus*, meaning "hand"—Kagoshima asserts that art which manifests an individual sensibility can be achieved only by a direct, physical expression of mental processes and sensory perception. He literally illustrates his aesthetic theory and comments on contemporary art in *Missing Hand* (fig. 1, right). Here a "primitive" man, a stand-in for the contemporary artist, is "looking for" his hand which is cut off, obscured, and hovering directly in front of him as he looks away. Like the primitive who seeks harmony, Kagoshima indicates his need as an artist for a transcendent resolution of struggle, an understanding which encompasses conflicts. He depicts, and attempts to redress, a detachment of the individual from an essential self and an estrangement from vital existence.

In an installation of drawings, Kagoshima presents this estrangement as a metaphoric historical evolution. In a sequence of images, from the modern era back to prehistory, Kagoshima employs animals to symbolize our instinctual nature and to reveal the way we actually live (fig. 4, upper row). The first vignette, proceeding left to right, depicts a bird shattering a glass surface, a collision with the urban-dwelling armature (depicted through a window) which separates us from nature. He then attempts to overcome this alienation in an imaginary act, portraying his hand grasping a fish, but contrasts this experience with the scientific observation of nature in a laboratory—a white rat negotiates a spiral run.

Shifting the focus from animals to our own animal natures, Kagoshima proceeds, conjuring a hybrid creature of the subconscious, an inner nature like that of the dreaming man next who is submerged in his inner spirit of a wolf. Finally, a circle of figures in trance-like states floating in various aerial perspectives radiates from a collapsing or expanding spiral of time.

Under this panorama/chronology, the artist installed a cycle of seasons. For this series, Kagoshima created four triptychs, each including a brightly decorated glass or vessel, a dramatically evoked seasonal landscape, and a reductive black-and-white interior. The glasses are not unlike tourist souvenirs and evoke the landscapes, making them seem like caricatures of the seasons. Kagoshima playfully assumes a tourists's naivete, as though he was collecting souvenirs from hotel rooms or gift shops.

The artist's application of extremely disparate and distinctive styles is a practice which allows him to examine and respond to the world with a certain freedom from cultural, as well as artistic, preconceptions and standards. Subject matter, rather than style, which he views as "appearance," articulates meaning and relates his work. In both *Platonic Love* and *One Admission Free*, for example, the subjects are clothed in "costumes" which the artist has simply "borrowed," inserting them in a context of his own. Style functions theatrically in presenting the subject, the true content. Furthermore, style itself is borrowed and operates as cultural commentary. In the "Seasons," the expressionist handling of paint contrasts ironically with the rather kitschy glasses, stilted landscapes, and coolly withdrawn interiors.

Style then is a choice among many pre-existing or even found possibilities.³ In *1-2-3-4*, 1982, which explicates "how to draw," Kagoshima illustrates this contention (fig. 2, left). Here, the contour of a bear is

didactically made of a sequence of differing kinds of strokes. Next to the bear, a self-fabricating cartoon man from a '30s advertisement draws himself rather arbitrarily in a step-by-step sequence. The juxtaposition portrays an encroachment of Western consumerism—the bid by PepsiCola for the Soviet market, symbolized by the bear—as a disarming sleight-of-hand. The work also touches on the ability of images—as in this simple, almost propagandistic, advertisement—to manipulate.

As an extension of the artist's conception of the hand as a means of making art, Kagoshima's work similarly is deployed to manipulate, to affect the viewer. The artist likens this function of his work to that of a playwright in that he also adopts various devices—fictional and dramatic—to appeal to and engage the viewer. Like the cartoon man, Kagoshima considers the figures in his work—both human and animal—as characters, as vehicles of his ideas. The numerous mask-like heads in the installation underscored this theatrical conception in general while demonstrating in particular the lasting influence of Japanese aesthetic culture on the artist's work.⁴ As in the Noh theater, masks both evoke and conceal. For Kagoshima, art's primary purpose is to stimulate and intrigue by suggesting aspects of an undisclosed reality; to be successful, a work must embody mystery—something must remain "hiding" in it.

For "WorkSpace," Kagoshima dramatized his ideas about his work and the process of its creation. At the outset, the installation, which changed throughout the course of the exhibition, featured a toy cannon made of a roll of drawing paper on wheels aimed at the atomic blast of the self-portrait, implying that art is an activity allied with play. Its projectory spanned a "playbox" in which Kagoshima "collected" various objects and paintings, referring to his selection from the unstructured continuum of the environment. He attempted to re-create this environment in a barrage of disparate kinds of work, layered and juxtaposed throughout, offering the viewer an experience similar to that of making art, of extricating an order from a dense layering of stimuli.

For Kagoshima, creation of art requires a focus beyond the art object to its source. In several works, which visualize this idea, the artist perforated the surface with the outline of a hand, referring to the means of making art and allowing the viewer to see through the openings. Significantly, this strategy is incorporated in self-portraits. In one (fig. 4, left), the artist portrays himself looking through a canvas depicted with such perforations "for the reality behind my art."

Kagoshima's art is enmeshed in two symbiotic sources and systems of meaning: one of a reality perceived and one of our constructed relations to that world, which he presents in his art. Through the ruptures in the surface of these works, reality literally and disconcertingly infiltrates the sacrosanct integrity of the art. Yet it is the art which allows us to see through it, to have a glimpse of what exists—here in a very essential way, right before our eyes. Like the self-portrait *1945–1982*, the perforated works demonstrate a circularity. Both the need to create art and the need to envision a new reality, to establish new possibilities of meaning and social order as a context for art, are points of departure on a circular path. The birth of the age of potential nuclear extinction has propelled the artist on a journey through past and present, aimed at the future; the creation of art is the indispensable instrument of this search—and also its goal.

Robin Dodds



NOTES

1. Kagoshima grew up during the American occupancy of Japan after World War II. His father worked on an American military base where, as a child, he was exposed to the contrast in cultures which continues to provide a dialectic source of meaning in his work. The transformation of Japanese culture and society in the wake of defeat served as an example of the relative states of social structures in time and may have instigated his research into cultural history (see discussion in text).

2. All quotations were transcribed by the author from taped conversations with the artist in March 1983, unless quoted material is rhetorical or otherwise noted.

3. Kagoshima utilizes painting he finds discarded, modifying the images with an overlay of his own work.

4. There were three bodies of work in the exhibition which were based on the human face or head, including a series of fifteen, 78 x 58" canvases, entitled *Heads*, 1982; several works derived from the artist's notebooks of gridded pages filled with thousands of small heads (see fig. 2, base of walls); and a series of drawings in which figures emerged from the landscapes of mask-like faces (fig. 3, upper right).

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of Contemporary Art

65 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003

E'wao Kagoshima

Born in Niigata, Japan, 1945. Attended Tokyo National University of Fine Arts (M.A., 1969). Lives in New York City.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1974 Craft Asakura Gallery, Tokyo
1975 Mato Grosso Gallery, Tokyo
1976 Peter Flanagan Gallery, New York
Bergdorf Goodman, New York (department store window)
Nagai Gallery, Tokyo
1977 Art Center of Northern New Jersey Gallery, Tenafly (sponsored by the North Jersey Cultural Council)
1982 Ten Gallery, Fukuoka, Japan

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1968 *Miniature Shop*, Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo
1974 *100 Artists Exhibition*, Mato Grosso Gallery, Tokyo
1977 *Eleventh Dulin National Print and Drawing Competition*, Knoxville
1978—
1980 *Great America Foot*, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York (traveled)
1979 *International Miniature Print Competition*, Pratt Graphics Center Gallery, New York (traveled)
A Survey of Contemporary Japanese Art '79, Windows on the East, One World Trade Center, New York (sponsored by Japan Society, Inc., and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey)
1980 *Fourth Annual Competition*, 80 Washington Square East Gallery, New York University, New York
1981 *Fifth Annual Competition*, 80 Washington Square East Gallery, New York University, New York
1983 *New Blood*, Gabrielle Bryers Gallery, New York
Terminal New York, 58th Street and First Avenue, Brooklyn (organized by AAA Art)